

ABSTRACT

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AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF BLACK WOMEN COPING WITH INNER TURMOIL.

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This study examined the coping mechanism of 'sounding out' as a verbal strategy used by black women to express inner turmoil. This expression takes place away from home and family.

The study was based on the premise that verbal release serves only one purpose. It allows women room to add to their burdens. It, thus, offers a momentary release from stress.

An ethnographic study was conducted which presents an array of reasons women have for going to the beauty shop. One important reason is to 'sound out,' thus allowing them to cope with their individual situations.

The researcher found that black women need to 'sound out.' Black women are reluctant to seek professional help. They envision it as a weakness. For survival they incorporate an old process and rejuvenate it. Thus the beauty shop becomes the psychiatrist's office and the other women become a counseling group.

The conclusions drawn from the findings suggest that women are aware of their psychological needs. They recognize and they solve them in socially acceptable ways. The problem-solution format used is an old one that employs a traditional method--- 'sounding out.'

AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF BLACK WOMEN
COPING WITH INNER TURMOIL

A THESIS

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

While most African American women would not hesitate to call a doctor for a medical problem, many are reluctant to seek professional help for a personal emotional matter. Any overt admission of one's inability to handle personal problems is viewed in the black community as a sign of weakness by women of color. Thus a coping mechanism--sounding out, has evolved as a major means of expressing inner turmoil.

For centuries African American women have employed the verbal strategy of sounding out as a means of coping. It is a strategy that involves a verbal expounding of 'anything that ails ya.' It is a venting mechanism that allows a woman to release frustrations, verbalize unhappiness--- 'clear the air.' It requires little by way of material- two or more women in a relaxed environment. Expression of one's inner turmoil can take place anywhere, except the home. The woman is the foundation and strength of the home, and it is her job to be the family's sounding board. If she falters "the house comes tumbling down." So she keeps her dilemmas within; thus other sounding arenas are sought out. Arenas that will not interfere with the day-to-day routine; e.g., the beauty shop. There is a need when expressing turmoil, to do it away from home and family.

More often than not, this verbal release of turmoil serves only one purpose. It gives the woman room to add to her burdens. In so doing, the turmoil never ends.

Women never get enough release; subsequently, women are forever venting. It does, however, form a sense of camaraderie between expounders---a feeling of “being in this thing together;” a feeling of “we can make it.” Gossip is a form of sounding out that will take place in the beauty shop. The women will look for others to express any anxieties and to gain some form of relief. The responses being made by black women to the real life situations presented in soap operas is another way of handling difficult situations. Soap opera narratives are generally closely related to the women’s daily frustrations.

Statement of the Problem

How black women enter into the beauty shop for more than appearance will be addressed in this study. The increasing number of women coming into the beauty shop to gossip and to look at soap operas (obviously coming to release their frustrations); can be interpreted as a form of ‘sounding out.’ This researcher realizes that black women need to ‘sound out’ as a form of releasing stress and as a way of coping. In response to this concern, this researcher will present an array of reasons women have for coming to the beauty shop---e.g., to enhance their appearance, to provide suggestions for women, to ‘sound out’; and to cope with their situations.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this research is to examine the way African American women “speak out.” An attempt will be made to evaluate the effectiveness of sounding out. It is

my hope that the information contained in the succeeding chapters will furnish the reader with a more complete understanding of how women cope when “sounding out” their frustrations.

The focus of this study will be African American women in a selected environment ‘venting.’ Conversations will be taped, transcribed, and analyzed for evidence of coping strategies. A list of personal topics in several situations will be compiled and analyzed for content and classification. The idea that certain topics are seldom discussed; whereas others are “overworked” will be the central focus. African American women are hesitant to discuss intimate problems; however, domestic concerns are as common as comments about the weather.

An attempt will be made to establish a woman’s mood---via body language---before and after the “venting” exercises. It is proposed that a sense of well-being emanates from a woman’s ability to sound-out. It is proposed that women seek out situations for the sole purpose of venting. The smiles on the faces of women released momentarily from the turmoil of daily living testify to the effectiveness of “sounding out” and the emotional impact of venting.

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Women tend to look on the “outside” for some form of “sounding out” or getting problems off their chest. The outsider status provides a special standpoint on self, family, and society for black women. In spite of the obstacles that can confront outsiders, many women benefit from this person, this stranger offers a helpful starting point for understanding and venting the largely unexplored area of the situation.¹

Sometimes when women find themselves “sounding out,” they tend to become persuaded by the women listening. Persuasion is a form of a communication process that occurs within the interpersonal or public communicative setting. The sender of a message seeks to change the attitude and behavior of her receiver through verbal or non-verbal stimuli.²

The problem black women may experience is not being able to express their emotions and feelings properly; consequently creating unnecessary stress. We need to know how to communicate properly. Some women however, learn early that by responding with anger, they can get out of a predicament; while others, whose experience tells them that anger only makes things worse.

¹ Eugene Ehrlich, Oxford American Dictionary, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 907.

² Patricia Hill Collins, “Learning from the Outsider Within: The Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thought,” Journal of Social Problems 186 (1990): S14-S32.

It is not always easy to cope with stress alone. Sometimes we all need to seek the help of others to resolve our problems. Sometimes seeking help perpetuate “sounding out.” For many, this is a major barrier. Our tough-minded culture does not allow us to talk to other people honestly, particularly to our colleagues or friends and relatives, for fear of being seen as weak or inadequate. So we keep struggling until we are ill, which is now time to go to the doctor. It is important to realize that a lot of unnecessary stress can be avoided and illnesses prevented by enlisting simple help. The greatest form of help is “sounding out.”³

Some women prefer not to accept support from other women. To understand unwanted support, it needs to be recognized that there are limited ways support is conveyed. Some women in certain environments are reluctant to share personal information (letting women know their business). However, there is a large number of women who do not mind dispensing their affairs, especially in the beauty shop.

Specifically, support can be given merely by listening to the troubled person, by asking questions, by giving guidance and advice, by demonstrating esteem and affection, and, more directly, by shielding the stressed person from additional stress buildup and by providing stress--reducing diversions: the latter two are “sounding out” mechanisms.⁴

³ Delindus R. Brown, and Wanda F. Anderson, “ A Survey of the Black Woman and the Persuasion Process: The study of strategies of identification and resistance,” Journal of Black Studies 9 (1978): 233.

⁴ Bonnie Dill, Race, class, and gender: prospects for an all inclusive sisterhood, (Philadelphia: Charles Press, 1993), 54.

The utilization of each of these mechanisms may convey support that interferes with or disrupts the effectiveness of others.⁵ The culprit is advice giving. In most instances, dissatisfaction occurs in situations where unwanted or timely advice is given. Why is advice unwanted? In answering their question, it is assumed defenses are set up.

Advice is not accepted because the person receiving the advice assumes the person giving it is unfamiliar with their situation. Advice is perceived to be more in the service of the woman giving the advice. Advice also fails because it is perceived by the person attempting to give it as a way of minimizing and controlling the problem.⁶ It is our impression that advice is likely to be more accepted and more effective, if it is offered last in a sequence of supportive acts rather than first. This in turn gives the woman a chance to 'sound out' or 'vent' her situation. Giving her some form of relief, by allowing her to release her frustrations. Verbalization also known as 'sounding out,' requires no immediate 'advice.'

Gossip is a form of 'sounding out'. The beauty shop provides an excellent arena for sounding out and advice. Women look for women with similar problems. People who gossip are unhappy with their situation. They gossip, so that they can handle their problems by minimizing their situations and keying in or focusing on others. Most of the time women gossip because of the familiarity of the circumstances. Likewise,

⁵ J. Eckenrode, Stress Between Work and Family, (New York: London Press, 1990), 127.

⁶ Ibid.

with the various contrast of black women entering the beauty shop it is quite ironic to find many of the women having the same experience.

Gossip is a form of coping because it allows the woman to release herself from anxieties and to gain some form of relief. Additionally, gossip ---a covert form of sounding out, allows the sounder to express her views in the guise of another woman's dilemmas.

Gossip has developed from a positive term into a derogatory term applied mostly to women. The idea that 'gossip' is idle talk stems from its derogatory demeanor. 'Gossip' originally referred to an idea encompassing both god-parent family friend. It developed out of the old English as a contraction of the phrase 'god sib' and referred to the relation a family would have with someone they felt close enough to make into a god parent for one of their children.⁷

The response being made by black women to the real life situations presented in soap operas is another coping mechanism. There is no exaggeration that black women are interested in soap operas, and the reasons are clear. Understanding this reason is central to the many debates about the nature of popular beliefs, about the relationship between real and implied situations and about understanding women.⁸ Because of the serial format, soap operas can offer events which can be incorporated into the daily lives of its viewers (i.e.. Divorce, Romance, Christmas). Characters can 'grow' slowly and become familiar to women in ways that are similar to real life experiences. Stories are

⁷ Alexander Rysaman, "How the gossip became a woman," Journal of Communication 181 (1977): 45 - 62.

⁸ C. Brunson, "Crossroads--- notes on soap opera," Screen 22 (1978) : 32- 37.

endless and unresolved, as a reality.⁹ This is the reason black women relate to soap operas and are most familiar with them. Black women ‘sound out’ and talk back to the characters in the soap opera.

Thus, soap opera narratives are closely related to the rhythms of women’s daily frustration. As has been argued by many commentators on soap operas---the typical woman can relate and become interested. Subsequently, women ‘sound out’ according to their familiarities with characters and situations occurring.¹⁰

Soap operas are positioned in a way that validates female skills: she must be a universal mother, who can see beyond the points of view of the individual characters and their conflicts and embrace a framework which makes all of them comprehensible; or she must have a countenance which enables her to evaluate the multifarious behaviors she sees in a consistent manner.¹¹

⁹ Christine Geraghty, Women and Soap Opera. A Study of Primetime Soaps, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990) 215.

¹⁰ Chandra Patel, The Complete Guide to Stress Management, (New York: Guilford Press, 1991), 45.

¹¹ T. Madleski, “ The Search For Tomorrow in Today’s Soap Operas,’ Film Quarterly 33 (1981): 12-21.

Theoretical Framework

Symbolic interaction is a social-psychological perspective; its primary focus is on the individual 'with a self' and on the interaction between a person's internal thoughts, emotions, and social behavior. Most of the analysis is of small-scale interpersonal relationships. Individuals are viewed as active constructors of their own conduct who interpret, evaluate, define, and map out their own action, rather than as passive beings who are impinged upon by outside forces.¹² Symbolic interactions also stress the processes by which the individual makes decisions and forms opinions.

Erving Goffman focuses on behavior and action in 'the interaction order,' the domain of face-to-face social interaction, "where two or more individuals are physically in one another's presence."¹³ Our sense of self, of what is real, and how we feel is bound up in---is inextricably knotted for the ever moving microdynamics of the immediate interaction order in endlessly complicated ways of which we are not aware. Some of the basic units and recurrent structures and processes of the interaction order, from the smallest to the largest are:

1. **Persons** whether single, couples, files, processions, or queues;
2. **Contacts** either through physical co--presence, telephone conversation, or letter exchange.
3. **Encounters** arrangements in which persons come together in

¹² Anthony Giddens, Central Problems in Social Theory, (New York and London, 1989), 23.

¹³ Erving Goffman, "The Interaction Order," American Sociological Review 48 (1983):8-15.

small physical circle as participants in a consciously shared, interdependent undertaking.

4. **Platform Performances** where activity is set before an audience.

5. **Celebrative Social Occasions** gatherings of individuals in honor of some jointly appreciated circumstance where participants arrive and leave in a coordinated way.¹⁴

Many social theorists tend to overlook, ignore, or dismiss people's emotions as irrelevant.¹⁵ They ask, 'what do individual feelings have to do with explaining the social world?' Symbolic interaction focuses on subjective meanings.

It should take the emotions more seriously than other theories and supply many of the ingredients for social theory of emotion.¹⁶

Weber's discussion of the importance of subjective meaning in his definition of sociology allows for the relationship between individual emotions and social interaction, without making it explicit. It is argued that the subjective meaning is an active individual ascribing to a situation which includes an emotional element. The feelings people have toward those with whom they come in contact is a factor which can and does enter into the individual's definition of the situation.

This in turn, influences people's decisions about whether to interact, to withdraw,

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

or as Weber put it, to 'passively acquiesce' in the situation.¹⁷

Taking another look at Simmel's description of human linkages, we discover that he includes two emotions---jealousy and gratitude---as examples of the 'countless minor syntheses' that increasingly tie people together.¹⁸

Blumer's discussion of the role of self-indication in the interpretation process also includes implicit mention of the emotions. Worries, anxieties, jealousy, pride, love, contempt--a whole array of emotions---are often included in the conversations people have with themselves.¹⁹ Thus what people are feeling and their self-indications about those feelings help them to devise or 'map out' their conduct. In other words, human beings often choose one behavior over another because it 'feels good.'

In developing a new approach to conceptualizing and treating psychological distress in women, why select 'philosophy of treatment'--a rather esoteric-sounding concept-as a starting point? There are two answers to this question.

One is that the womens' movement of the last decade has made a profound and lasting impact on the practice of psychotherapy. It has generated criticism of the theory and practice of traditional psychotherapy, exposed sexist biases in psychotherapy, and called for a reexamination of the basic assumptions and values of psychotherapy with regard to women. The response to these concerns has been the development of a new

¹⁷ Max Weber, The Theory of social and Economic Organization (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964) 2.

¹⁸ Wolff, The Sociology of Georg Simmel (New York and London, 1990), 124.

¹⁹ Herbert Blumer, "How feelings in turn affect behavior," personal interview New York: Sage Publications, Inc., (1975).

kind of therapy for women, based on an integration of feminist philosophy into therapeutic theory and practice. This new therapy stresses the importance of therapists' attitudes, values, and beliefs on the therapy process and outcome. These are primarily philosophical, not theoretical or technical, concerns.

Secondly, it seems logical that, if we are to build a new system of therapy for women, we should begin with the basic philosophical assumptions that form the core of any approach to treatment. While modern psychology began as an extension of the scientific method of study into human behavior, the practice of psychotherapy will always be related as much to what we believe about people as to what we know about them.

Social Interaction

Georg Simmel is best known in contemporary sociology for his contributions to our understanding of the patterns, or forms, of social interaction. He expressed his interest in this level of social reality in this way:

“We are dealing here with microscopic-molecular processes within material, so to speak. These processes are the actual occurrences that are concentrated or hypostatized into those macrocosmic, solid units and systems. That people look at one another and are jealous of one another; that they exchange letters or have dinner together; that apart from all tangible interests they strike one another as pleasant or unpleasant; that gratitude for altruistic acts makes for inseparable union; that one asks another to point out a certain street; that people dress and adorn themselves for each other--these are a few casually chosen illustrations from the whole range of relations that play between one person and other.” (Simmel, 1908/1959B: 327-328)

Simmel made clear that one of his primary interests was interaction (association) among conscious actors and that his intent was to look at a wide range of interactions that may seem trivial at some times, but crucially important at others.

One of Simmel's dominant concerns was the form rather than the content of social interaction. This concern was from Simmel's identification with the Kantian tradition in philosophy, in which much is made of the difference between form and content. Simmel felt that the real world is composed of innumerable events, actions, interactions, and so forth. Perhaps most important, in terms of Simmel's interest in forms of interaction, is that increasing size and differentiation tend to loose the bonds between individuals and leave in their place much more distant, impersonal, and segmental relationships. Paradoxically, the large group that frees the individual simultaneously threatens that individuality. Also paradoxical is Simmel's belief that one way for individuals to cope with the threat of the mass society is to immerse themselves in small groups such as the family.

Another of Simmel's concerns in social geometry was distance. Distance plays a role in Simmel's 'the stranger' (1908/19971B), an essay on a type of actor who is neither too close nor too far. If a person is too close, he would no longer be a stranger, but if the person were too far, they would cease to have any contact with the group. The interaction that the stranger engages in with the group members involves a combination of closeness and distance. The peculiar distance of the stranger from the group allows him to have a series of unusual interaction patterns with the members. Because he is a stranger, other group members feel more comfortable expressing confidence to him. In these and other ways, a pattern of coordination and consistent interaction emerges between the stranger and the other group members. The stranger becomes an organizing member of the group. Simmel not only considered the stranger a social type; he

considered strangeness a form of social interaction. A degree of strangeness, involving a combination of nearness and remoteness, enters into all social relationships, even the most intimate. Thus, we can examine a wide range of specific interactions in order to discover the degree of strangeness found in each.

Symptoms do not become 'symptoms' until they are so labeled by someone. They are merely feelings, attitudes or behaviors that take on the meaning assigned to them by the observer according to his/her value system. What is seen as a symptom of physiological disturbance in one culture is called 'possession' in another and in a third may be taken as a sign of religious stature.

Therapists generally understand symptoms as expressions of conflicts. They hold (implicitly) the conviction that human beings are universal. The work of the therapist rests on the belief that human beings are capable of understanding the symbolization's employed by other people. If symptoms are viewed as symbolic representations of inner states, there are within the mental health profession widely divergent views regarding the nature and meaning of these symbols.

The symbolic interaction and social interaction is applicable to sociologists and ethnologists who work with women as to how they act toward or respond to each other. Symbolic interaction is the interaction between people that occurs through use of symbols, such as gestures and language. Additionally, social interaction involves the process of social behavior---smiling at people, asking questions, having disagreements. Society should not get caught up in believing and recommending counseling or therapy for women with frustrations. Symbolic interaction and social interaction can help to

increase their positive attitudes of women coping with their frustrations, by 'sounding out' or 'venting.' A way of dispelling the native idea that women are just frustrated is to pay close attention and listen to the women. When they are able to interact socially, they remove impediments by 'sounding out.' The ability to interpret this behavior combined with shared understandings of symbols, makes meaningful social interaction possible. Social interaction can take place in an orderly manner only if we are able to interpret the endless variety of situations in which interaction occurs.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

Information was obtained using the ethnography approach, which includes a participant observation approach. Participant observation approach is used when the researcher pays strict attention, watching and listening carefully, and must become part of the group. The researcher uses all the senses, noticing what is seen, heard, smelled, tasted, or touched. The researcher becomes an instrument that absorbs all sources of information. By being a participant observer in the group, the researcher was provided with opportunity to share in the give and take and the positive and the negative interactions with the women in the beauty shop. A daily schedule of observations in the beauty shop, demonstrated the concept of ‘venting’ or ‘sound out’ as a way of expressing inner turmoil. Observations were made and data collected as soon as possible after each visit.

The procedure involved keeping a notebook of events and relevant responses made by women during each visit. During the visits, strict attention was paid to the issues discussed. Beauticians working at the shop were identified, their discussion and their experienced contributions to the women ‘sounding out’ were recorded. The topics of conversations were analyzed for morals, counseling, and outcomes. The results

indicated that 'venting' solves nothing . It only allows the ventor a temporary release. from built up frustrations and anxieties. Qualitative social research relies largely on the interpretive and critical approaches to social science.¹ Qualitative research uses more of a logic in practice. It relies on the informal wisdom that has developed from the experiences of researchers. Qualitative researchers emphasize the importance of social context for understanding the social world.²

The method chosen to depict the interrelationships of the women sounding out and the issues were modifications of one used by ethnologists in analyzing social systems. This method has been used in small group studies as a conceptual model that corresponds to the roles of group members as a part of the social system.

A rough measure of the reliability of the data recorded was established by observation and compared the data provided by the researcher. In the process, the researcher was able to clearly identify each individual's comments to insure accuracy and objectivity, while assessing the importance of venting, as well as the frequency of individual ventors, the participant observer does not need to defend the reliability or validity of the data. Based on this research method, the researcher's data will add to the objectivity of the research.

¹ Anselm Strauss, Qualitative analysis for social scientists (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987) 2.

Description of the Sample

The sample consisted of a profuse number of black women. The sample was selected from women at a southwest Atlanta, middle- class beauty shop. The selection criteria for the sample required that the sampling unit include black women who are clients of the beauty shop.

The shop is owned by an outside agent. Beauticians rent booths with booth rent due every Saturday. The shop opens at 8:00 a.m. and closes when the last customer leaves. The shop is closed on Sundays and Mondays; the busiest days are Thursday, Friday, and Saturday. The shop can accommodate a total of 25 people (beauticians included). It houses a stereo system, television, snack machine and drink machine, and is located in a African American neighborhood with bus accessibility. It is attractively decorated -- and has extra chairs for visitors.

The beauticians who work in the shop represent varied social, religious and philosophical view points. These viewpoints encourage customer variety, making the sounding out arena more diverse. Beautician #1 is a middle- aged Catholic. She is divorced with one son, and owns her home. Beautician #2 is a thirty- year old Baptist. She is single with one son and one daughter, and lives with her boyfriend. Beautician #3 is a forty- three year old Baptist. She is married with two sons, and owns a home. Beautician #4 is a twenty - six year old Methodist with no children, and rents an apartment. Beautician #5 is a thirty- nine year old non- religious affiliation woman with no children. She is engaged and owns her own condo. Beautician #6 is a thirty- six year old male. He is single, and rents an apartment.

CHAPTER FOUR

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

The average observation time was three hours, occurring each day from Tuesday to Saturday. During the observation the regular shop operations were performed. This included hair and nail services, appointment scheduling, and drop by visits.

It is Saturday morning at 11:00 a.m., with all beauticians and barber present. This morning the shop is partially full. Customers continue to arrive until about 12:30 p.m. The conversation is rather reserved and mostly about the weather. Coffee seems to be the most important topic. By 1:00 p.m. all beauticians are working. There is a group forming at the dryers. For a Saturday, the customers are elegantly dressed in 'casual' attire. Every customer seems to need her eyebrows shaped----a job done by the barber. The conversation is general--latest clubs, nice restaurants, current fashions, and non-opinionated statements about current events. It appears that women "wear the mask that hides and grins." On the outside they appear reserved, confident and in control. The presence of men (customers of the barber) interferes with the sounding out process.

It is Wednesday afternoon at 4:00 p.m., with all beauticians present and the barber is present. The shop is quiet today. Customers are scarce and several beauticians are absent. The conversations taking place are low and secretive. Posture is noted. Beauticians lean over clients and whisper. Occasionally one other person participates.

Facial expressions are tense. At 6:00 p.m., other customers enter. It seems that the 'sounding out' topic was decided during the gossiping exchange.

Other participants appeared closed- minded and extremely opinionated. The topic today was that one of the customers is having problems that stems from her fiancée refusing to go to premarital counseling. She is Catholic. This means that her non-Catholic fiancée must agree to certain religious stipulations in order for the church to sanction their union. The women in the shop appear predatory----eager to jump anyone who opposes them, voicing their opinions denotes that there are various religions present.

It is Friday afternoon at 4:00 p.m., with all beauticians present; barber absent. Today is a hectic one----every customer seemingly has evening plans. The beauticians seem to be 'creating' ----the styles requisition are elaborate and ornate. The women are all talking. The topic this evening is 'good men.' Note: The barber is not present. There seems to be little attention being paid to social class. The school cafeteria worker has joined on the side of the women who swear that men are dogs. It seems that this woman has found out her man is cheating. This group includes a guidance counselor, a criminal attorney, a housewife, a college student and Beautician #1. The gestures of the participants seem animated, by the waving of the hands and body movements. Their voices are loud and they link arms to acknowledge agreement. A board member of a prominent women's organization and a minister's wife just walked in. They join the interaction----all participants have a story to tell. The "victim" woman no longer appears to be the victim. She listens intently to the other stories about cheating. She smiles and

vows to find a faithful mate. It is evident from today's observation that "sounding out" crosses social class.

It is Saturday 1:00 p.m., with all beauticians present and barber absent. Women entering the shop are aware that the barber is not present; men stopped coming after the barber left. The beauticians and their clients dress appearance denoted this fact. The mask is shed and in the absence of men, women speak freely. The women are slow about talking. There is a new customer in the shop. She leaves and the conversation starts. Since "sounding out" involves camaraderie, outsiders must be asked to join in the process. The topic today is money. One of the clients is distressed -- It appears that her bills exceed her income. When they finished "sounding out," everyone seemed happy. The common problems associated with money -- e.g. Phones disconnected, water off, creditors' calls, have been experienced by all. Nobody feels different.

It is Thursday 10:00 a.m., with all beauticians present and barber absent. Seven women are in the shop. It appears that all women work and will go to work when they leave the shop. Two women separate from the group. They move to the back of the shop to gossip. The 'numbers man' comes in about 11:30 a.m. He discusses an event that has occurred at Crickets on Cascade. Two minors were removed from the bar due to fake identification. They were busted when a family member noticed one of the minors, as she was conversing with an older fellow. The topic this morning is alcohol. A customer's husband has abused her -- an event that occurs when he is drunk. Each woman has a story. It seems that they all personally know an alcoholic. The shop

resembles an alcohol anonymous meeting. Each woman offers a suggestion for dealing with a drunk. They are extremely supportive and vow to check on the customer daily.

It is Thursday 4:00 p.m., with all beauticians present and barber absent. Women entering the shop began to get comfortable -- heels are removed, jackets tossed, lipstick removed. A sense of calm permeates the shop. The absence of Beautician #6 makes the shop a more relaxed place, because of his gender. The women felt more tranquil around their same gender. Several women are discussing the soap opera, " Another World." The topic today concerns women who feel unappreciated and over -- worked. One by one -- opinions fly. A customer -- a classroom teacher -- has had a run- in with a parent. Each customer itemizes her job's duties and responsibilities. They conclude that the work they perform speaks for them, not the praise they receive. The teacher leaves with a fresh look and replenished outlook.

It is Tuesday 4:00 p.m., with all beauticians present, barber absent. The Tuesday crew meets up at the shop. It is obvious that these women are 'shop friends.' The women watch the program and internalize the events. Today's topic 'men who cheat.' The conversation is lively, because of the noted high volume of voices, profanity and high fives. One woman confessed that when she saw another women in her car with her boyfriend, she lost it. She went up to the car and started to beat him in the face and how she used profanity at the woman in the car. She added, that she called the police to have her car reported as stolen, and how she was out for revenge against her ex- boyfriend. One woman has recently separated. She is emotional about the topic. Several women surround her, pulling from her the details. A sense of family emerges. The older women

become maternal. The familiarities of the group elicit fervent responses. The women do not seem apprehensive. The 'sounding out' process seems to ease the tensions.

The effectiveness of sounding out was brought about when support was given to the woman sounding out. Support was given by listening, asking questions, giving guidance and advice, demonstrating affection, shielding the stressed person from additional stress buildup. Women in the beauty shop provided a special standpoint on self, family, and societies' issues; this is the one reason why "sounding out" is done away from home. Women in the beauty shop offered helpful starting points of understanding and venting in various situations. The women in the beauty shop have learned that it is not easy to cope with stress alone and sometimes we all need to seek the help of others to resolve our problems and sometimes seeking help perpetuates "sounding out."

The beauty shop provided an excellent arena for "sounding out." Women looked for women with similar problems. Gossip was noted as a form of sounding out because it allowed the woman to release herself from her anxieties and gain some form of relief. Thus, soap opera narratives were closely related to the rhythms of women's daily frustrations. The typical woman could relate to the soap operas and become interested. Consequently, women were "sounding out" according to their familiarities with the characters and situations that were occurring.

As Weber stated, "the feelings people have toward those with whom they come in contact is a factor which could and does enter the individual's definition of the situation." This in turn, influences people's decisions about whether to interact, to withdraw, or 'passively acquiesce' in the situation."¹ Therefore, the influences from other women at

the beauty shop declared that this method of “sounding out” was effective and helped to relieve stress build up.

Before the women were able to interact with “sounding out,” they felt lonely within their situations and consumed with pressures and stress from their present dilemmas. After the “sounding out” was released, the women felt less burdened and relief to know that they were not alone, and that “I can make it.”

Domestic concerns were also revealed during “sounding out,” for example the mental and physical abuse as a result of an alcoholic, in addition to mental abuse from a cheating man in an expected monogamous relationship. When the women were able to interact socially, they in turn were able to relinquish barriers that had them bound by “sounding out.”

Sounding out included the women talking about themselves. One client shared how she could not find a decent man in the clubs. She was worn-out from dating different men and not finding one of the men qualified for a steady relationship. Children by other women, no jobs, dealing with narcotics and men staying with their mothers, were just a few dilemmas that had this woman stressed from not being able to find an appropriate mate.

Frustrations were constituted in sounding out at the beauty shop. Frustrations occurred when one woman had a troublesome time dealing with her abusive spouse. She expressed that her spouse would physically abuse her, when indulging in alcohol. She mentioned that one night her spouse came home and began to beat her profusely. Her

arm was broken and eyes were blackened. She declared that her love for him is what makes her complacent.

Problems with children added to the anxiety build up in these women at the beauty shop, thus causing them to sound out. Several women revealed that they were fed up with their children. Teenage daughters were beginning to date and become sexually active, out of rebellion against their mothers. The daughters would make comments about the mother not understanding them or being old fashioned. Teenagers lose sight during this stage of their lives and begin to face peer pressure, therefore not ever considering that their parents love them and have their best interest at hand. It was quite evident that by these women sounding out other parents were having the same experiences.

Sounding out has shed experience among everyone present in the beauty shop when economical problems are discussed. One woman shared how she has a Master's degree and she is only making \$25,000 annually. Another woman added that her supervisor cut back on the over time at her job. Most women in the shop revealed that it was hard to be a good parent and a bread winner. That is to say, women find it difficult to spend adequate time with their children because of their work hours and jobs.

The women in the beauty shop were noted to address general concerns . Such as, welfare, unemployment, and crime in the United States, concentrating their focus on the crimes in Atlanta. One woman expressed her sympathy to the violent act committed against an eight year old boy on his way to school. The young boy was brutally

murdered a block away from his home. Every woman that knew a child or had children feared their safety and began to discuss some solutions for child safety.

Effectiveness of Sounding Out

From the researcher's observation, sounding out did not solve matters, it only provided temporary release. This release provides “room to breathe.” It is a way of allowing a woman to remove some part of her burden, so that more burdens can be added. The women were seeking a method to express any anxieties and to gain some form of relief. The expression of anxieties seems to be momentary and the relief temporary. Thus the process of “sounding out” never stops. It is on-going. The more a person experiences the process, the more effective it becomes. It is not easy to cope with stress alone. Especially stress that is the product of personal dilemmas and financial difficulties. Women looked to other women for help in resolving their problems. This desire to find help perpetuates sounding out.

Sounding out does not provide an immediate cure for one's problems. What it does is to distance the problem; make it universal. Once a woman views her problem universally, she no longer feels isolated. Her ability to cope surfaces and the adage “birds of a feather flock together” becomes her guiding light. She constantly seeks situations that provide for sounding out. Understanding that other women are experiencing the same problems made the beauty shop a place for group therapy. A place where healing can start. The dynamics of “sounding out” are incorporated in the concept of group therapy. Therapy that elicits advice from others and understanding, so

that camaraderie and support from the group serve as remedies. When selecting group members, one factor is whether a candidate is motivated to make changes and is willing to expend the necessary effort to be productive in group therapy.² Group therapy and sounding out are very similar techniques, as it relates to women. Both techniques show that all those involved have similar situations. Group members and the women sounding out at the beauty shop can advise, learn to advise, and support each other. The beauty shop forces therapy on the reluctant woman. It transforms the clinical atmosphere, yet providing the same results. It is not always necessary to appear like a clinical environment; when results are measured there appears to be little differences in the effect of the therapy locations.

Diversity among members with respect to handling difficult situations' skills, life experience, and levels of expertise fosters learning and introduces members to different view points, lifestyles, ways of communicating and problem solving.³ This diversity encourages decision making and choice selection skills. It fosters the concept that there may be several options to solving problems. It removes from the therapy, the omnipotent doctor and makes each participant valuable.

To gain success within group therapy, the members involved must not focus on social classes, occupations, or cultures. Groups may either have an open format, in which the group remains open to new members, or closed format in which no new members are added once the group gets under way. An open format itself presents different models, including the drop- in (or drop out) model in which members are self --

selecting, and members attend whenever they wish for an indefinite period.⁴ The beauty shop would be considered an open group format type of therapy.

Though sounding out may seem trivial and minute, it has helped to resolve and relieve the inner turmoil in these women attending the beauty shop. This relief might not have been possible in a clinical situation. Since women see doctor supervised counseling in a negative light, the “sounding out” therapy is desperately needed. After “sounding out” the women felt less burdened. They found comfort in the knowledge that they were not alone. They felt as if “they could make it.” The women were not individually interviewed, but relief was shown as sounding out ended. Comments of relief were made by the women at the beauty shop. Some stated they felt much better because they were able to release added tension, clear the air, and that other women could relate to their situation.

In general, sounding out has proven to the researcher to be an effective counseling mechanism. Not only is “sounding out” a more effective counseling mechanism, it is cheaper and void of stigma. Since counseling is defined as improving the quality of life, focus should be placed on efforts used in assisting people to cope more effectively with problems of living. The beauty shop has become a form of therapeutic counseling for the women involved. The form of therapeutic counseling should be encouraged and monitored by health care physicians. A way of monitoring this form of counseling would make for more productive means of self expression. To monitor this therapeutic counseling therapists should allow the women to relax and begin to “spill

⁴ M. Henry, “Revisiting open groups,” Groupwork 1 (1988): 215-228.

their guts out” also known as sounding out. Women help each other cope more effectively with obstacles when the elements of fear, isolation and denial are removed.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

This study focused on African American women in a selected environment releasing tensions and stress associated with daily living. Since women are reluctant or hesitant to seek professional help, the coping mechanism used as an alternative was evaluated and assessed for its effectiveness. It appears that African American women are resourceful and that they are survivors. They have successfully found a way of release -- “sounding out.”

Conclusions drawn from observations indicate that the process of ‘sounding out’ is an effective counseling strategy. The effectiveness of sounding out was accomplished when support was given to the women sounding out. This was achieved by listening, asking questions, giving guidance and advice, demonstrating affection, shielding the stressed person from additional stress build up. The influence from the women in the beauty shop denotes the fact that “sounding out” is most effective with women trying to cope with inner turmoil. This strategy evokes a sense of wellness in the participants and provides an instant remedy without the stigma associated with medical help.

This study has examined only one ‘counseling’ situation. It is assumed that many exist. The presence of men in the shop stifles the natural flow of ‘sounding out.’ There is no evidence of social class or class stratification during the ‘sounding out’ interactions.

Gossip evokes attitudes that appear inflexible. Gossiping involves a limited number of participants. Subsequently, gossip occurs before or after 'sounding out' participation. It stimulates continued interaction with severe limitations placed on listening. Gossip participants appear closed minded. Ideas presented in the media and on talk shows perpetuate the 'sounding out' topic for the day.

Topics discussed during 'sounding out' are personal in nature. 'Sounding out' topics discussed during the week are focused more on personal concerns. 'Sounding out' involves a wide range of opinions based on experiences. The occurrences of 'sounding out' cause participants to engage in the process more readily. 'Sounding out' involves a special camaraderie among participants. Outsiders seem to be allowed into this selected counseling session.

The symbolic interaction and social interaction theory were applicable to the researcher who worked with women as to how they act toward or respond to each other. Symbolic interaction is the interaction between people that occurs through use of symbols such as gestures and language. Additionally, social interaction involves the process of social behavior -- smiling at people, asking questions, having disagreements. Symbolic interaction and social interaction theories claim that it increased the attitudes of women coping with their frustrations, by "sounding out" or "venting." When women were able to interact socially, they in turn were able to remove impediments by "sounding out."

By being a participant in the group, the researcher was provided with the opportunity to share in the give and take and the positive and negative interactions with

the women at the beauty shop. The method chosen to depict the interrelationships of the women sounding out and the issues were modifications of one used by ethnologists in analyzing social systems. The method has been used in small group studies as a conceptual model that corresponds to the roles of group members as a part of the social system.

Recommendations

It is recommended that psychiatrists and sociologists take a more astute assessment of African American women's behavior patterns; so that situations involving 'sounding out' can be evaluated and utilized for diagnostic prescription. It is recommended that more research be done to help women understand that 'sounding out' is normal and, this method would really help women vent. This method also helps to relieve pressure caused by anxieties built up. It is recommended that women try to sound out to avoid added stress. I also recommend that beauticians in beauty shops become aware that women use this time to "sound out." Beauticians in beauty shops should be aware or on the look out for this action and try not to prohibit these women from "sounding out."

APPENDIX A
DESCRIPTION OF BEAUTICIANS IN THE SHOP

Beautician #1

Religious preference:	Catholic
Marital status:	divorced (one son)
Housing:	owns home
Work schedule:	full time
Age:	42
Clientele:	middle age women (forties & fifties)

Beautician #2

Religious preference:	Baptist
Marital status:	single (one son, one daughter)
Housing:	lives w/boyfriend
Work schedule:	full time
Age:	31
Clientele:	early twenties/late thirties

Beautician #3

Religious preference: Baptist
Martial status: married (two sons)
Housing: owns home
Work schedule: full time
Age: 43
Clientele: mid twenties/early thirties

Beautician #4

Religious preference: Methodist
Martial status: single (no children)
Housing: rents apartment
Work schedule: full time
Age: 26
Shampoo assistant

Beautician #5

Religious preference: no religious affiliation
Martial status: engaged (no children)
Housing: owns condo
Work schedule: Tuesdays - Fridays
Age: 39
Clientele: older, professional women

Beautician #6

Religious preference:	Methodist
Martial status:	single
Housing:	rents house
Work schedule:	Tuesday/Thursdays/Saturdays
Age:	36

Note: During initial visits a barber was on duty in the shop. He has since left.

APPENDIX B

GLOSSARY

African American. Refers to individuals in the United States who, by virtue of their skin color and African heritage, have been classified or have identified themselves as being black. The term includes individuals who were born in the United States and immigrants from a number of African and Caribbean countries.

Gossip. Casual talk, especially about other people's affairs.

Sound out. To question (a person's), especially in a cautious or reserved manner, about his opinions or inclinations, to establish a temporary sense of camaraderie.

Stranger. A person in a place or company that people are not familiar with or well known.

Venting. To give an outlet to feelings, to express freely.

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